

# More Than Just a Trophy: The Rewards of Extracurricular Activity Participation for Children

By Jillian Wickery, PhD

About 80% of children's waking hours are spent outside of the classroom (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003), while about 40% of adolescents' time is spent in unrestricted leisure activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson & Verma, 1999). During this time, adolescents are not in school, doing homework or chores, or working ... so what are they doing? Emerging research suggests that participation in extracurricular activities is related to a variety of positive outcomes for children and adolescents.

Researchers have begun to closely consider the developmental consequences of extracurricular activity participation. Converging evidence suggests that adolescents' participation in extracurricular activities is linked with higher academic achievement as well as other aspects of positive development (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Several studies of children ranging from grades 5–12 have documented a positive association between extracurricular activity participation and increases in grade point average, school engagement, educational aspirations, and adult educational attainment (e.g., Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles

& Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Extracurricular activity participation is also positively associated with interpersonal competence and self-esteem (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002). Finally, participation in extracurricular activities is associated with higher levels of occupational outcome, income, and psychological adjustment, as well as less frequent substance use and involvement in delinquent and risky behaviors (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles et al., 2003).

### Constructive activities versus unstructured leisure time

For children and adolescents, constructive leisure activities (e.g., school-related, supervised sports teams or clubs) tend to carry more benefit than relaxed leisure or unsupervised free time (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Stimulating activities that have an ultimate purpose promote positive outcomes such as greater school engagement and academic achievement for children in grades 8–12 (Zaff et al., 2003). On the other hand, unstructured activities in elementary school or high school are associated with negative effects for children. Specifically, there are higher rates of school drop-out and criminal behavior among these children when they reach high school or adulthood (Mahoney, 2000).

Eccles and Barber (1999) suggest that constructive leisure activities might be more beneficial for children in grades 5–12 because they provide opportunities to acquire and practice valuable social, physical, and intellectual skills. Compared to relaxed leisure

activities, constructive leisure also allows children and adolescents more opportunity to experience and deal with challenges. Finally, constructive leisure facilitates children's establishment of social networks with both peers and adults (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

### **Different activities have different effects**

Different types of extracurricular activities are associated with differential outcomes in children and adolescents (Barber et al., 2001; Broh, 2002; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Guest & Schneider, 2003; McNeal, 1995). For example, in a study of 10th graders, Barber and colleagues (2001) found that those who participated in church, volunteer, or community service activities drank alcohol less often than those who did not participate in such activities. However, students who participated in sports drank alcohol more often, but used less marijuana than their non-athlete peers. In addition, athletes reported less social isolation than non-athletes, and students involved in church, volunteer, or community service activities reported higher self-esteem than non-participants (Barber et al., 2001).

McNeal (1995) found that participation in sports reduced high school students' likelihood of dropping out of school, whereas participation in academic clubs, debate team, drama club, vocational clubs (e.g., future homemakers, future teachers) and hobby clubs (e.g., photography, model building) were not related to drop out. Broh (2002) also found that high school students' participation in sports was associated with positive outcomes such as academic achievement, but noted that not all sports activities were equal. Interscholastic sports (versus intramural sports or cheerleading) were most beneficial in terms of students' academic achievement. Achievement was related to participation in music groups, but not to participation in student council, drama club, yearbook club, journalism club, or cheerleading (Broh, 2002).

### **Effects of sports participation**

Among high school students, sports participation is



linked to higher grades and test scores over time (Broh, 2002). Compared to non-participants, Eccles and Barber (1999) found that students who participated in sports during the 10th grade reported liking school more; they also had higher grade point averages by the 12th grade and a higher likelihood of attending college. In addition, Barber et al. (2001) found that 10th grade participation in sports predicted positive educational and occupational outcomes 8 years later, including years of education completed, college graduation rates, and income level.

Links between involvement in athletics and educational outcomes has also been found at younger ages, although there is less research on younger children. For example, Dumais (2006) found that students' athletic involvement in kindergarten and first grade (e.g., basketball or gymnastics, as assessed by the total number of athletic activities participated in) predicted higher reading test scores in third grade.

### Effects of participation in clubs and school organizations

Children and adolescents can also benefit from extracurricular involvement in clubs and school organizations such as Boy Scouts, student council, or pep club. For instance, Eccles and Barber (1999) found that adolescents who participated in academic clubs had higher grade point averages and were more likely to enroll in college at age 21 than their noninvolved peers. In a longitudinal study of kindergarten through third grade, Dumais (2006) found that participation in clubs was associated with gains in academic achievement (measured by reading test scores). Among middle school and high school students, Guest and Schneider (2003) found that level of involvement in non-sport extracurricular activities was associated with higher achievement and educational aspirations.

Compared to less-involved students, those who participate in organized clubs tend to have higher grades, and were rated as more academically competent by their teachers (Fletcher, Nickerson, & Wright,

2003). What factors might account for these findings? Fletcher and colleagues speculate that students involved in clubs might be more likely to develop social and behavioral competence because students learn interpersonal skills through social interaction facilitated by club involvement. Club participation may also teach cooperation and teamwork, qualities that benefit children and adolescents in the academic realm. Children who already exhibit qualities such as social and behavioral competence, confidence, conscientiousness, superior relational skills, and cooperativeness, might be more likely to participate in clubs that emphasize the development of positive personal attributes. Finally, children who participate may have also have parents who emphasize confidence and conscientiousness.

### Conclusion

While children can clearly benefit from organized sports or club activities, it is important to keep in mind that research does not suggest participation in extracurricular activities *causes* positive outcomes like higher academic achievement. Instead, participation in extracurricular activities tends to be *associated with* other positive characteristics like higher academic achievement. In other words, it is not clear whether students who already possess positive characteristics are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, whether extracurricular activities lead to the development of positive characteristics, or both.

Children can learn about themselves and their unique talents and interests by discovering what they like and what they are good at. Involvement in different types of activities is a great way for them to learn this. As children get older, they become less reliant on parents to sign them up for sports or clubs. Encourage older children to further develop their interests by joining clubs or teams that match their talents, or to try new things by joining in their friends' activities. As long as the activity is organized (and has high-quality adult supervision), it may be beneficial.

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## Author Biography



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